Working Towards a Sustainable Future Through Public Involvement

ECA Mission

To work toward a sustainable future for Alberta by providing leadership and long-term strategic policy advice on environmental conservation to the government, based on input from knowledgeable and concerned Albertans.

Report of the Transitional Working Group to the Environment Council of Alberta

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This report contains the recommendations of the Transitional Working Group to the Environment Council of Alberta (ECA). The Group consists of five members of the public, a government liaison, and the Chief Executive Officer of the ECA. These recommendations were developed by consensus and thus reflect the view of the Group as a whole.

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THE FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

This report deals with a specific aspect of the Environment Council of Alberta's new vision, that is, making the work of the new ECA relevant to Albertans. To be relevant, the ECA must be able to look at issues within a global context and interpret data from outside the province in ways that fit the Alberta context. The spectrum of public values of Albertans must be reflected in the work of the ECA. This requires that the publics of Alberta be involved in identifying the issues that constitute the work of the ECA, in prioritizing them, developing them more fully, and having access to the results. In other words, the publics of Alberta have a role to play in the ECA's functions.

The ECA has had a history of public involvement through its role in public hearings and through its former Public Advisory Committees. At hearings, the publics were a key source of information and opinion about the topic under discussion. At the same time, the Public Advisory Committees to the Council, Albertans largely representative of organizations, met to discuss issues of interest. This worked well as long as the ECA viewed itself as reacting to issues and situations as they arose.

The Environment Council of Alberta is a Crown Corporation reporting, through the Minister of Environment, to the Government of Alberta. The Council, established by an Act of the Alberta legislature, assists the Government in making appropriate decisions and policies about environmental conservation in the province.

However, the ECA is in transition. In order to continue to be effective, it has had to redefine itself and its work. It has appointed a new Chief Executive Officer, effective January 1990. It has introduced a new mission. And, it is developing a better system for responding to the new mission.

The new work of the ECA is embedded in a continuing vision of itself as an advisory agency that shows leadership in environmental conservation. Environmental conservation relates to the whole spectrum of environmental concerns from perservation, to protection, to management under development scenarios. Specifically, the new vision is of the ECA as a world-class leader, renowned for its ability to provide sound information and advice on environmental futures relevant to Alberta.

The roles and relationships between the ECA and the public it serves needed to be redefined. Therefore, the CEO appointed a Transitional Working Group. The Group was selected from those nominated at the final Annual Joint Meeting of the Public Advisory Committees to the ECA in March 1991. The Group consisted of five Albertans who represent themselves (their own points of view) and have different backgrounds and expertise, a government representative, and the CEO, who served as Chair. Group discussions were assisted by a professional facilitator.

The formation of the Transitional Working Group was announced by press release on April 22, 1991, with the following terms of reference:

(i) To advise the ECA on the design and operation of public and volunteer processes to fit with the new mission and proposed operation of the ECA.

(ii) To advise the ECA on ways to ensure the new mission is implemented and that the public is made aware of the process.

(iii) To assist the ECA in liaising with relevant groups and individuals to explore potential relationships between these groups and the ECA.

The Group met from April to August, 1991. With the release of this report, the work of the Transitional Working Group is complete.

DEFINING THE TASKS

After considering the terms of reference the Transitional Working Group identified four major tasks to be undertaken in completion of its mandate. These included identifying the publics to be served by the new ECA; selecting the principles to be used to govern the new ECA and the publics it serves; developing the processes and activities through which the new ECA and the publics it serves might interact and support each other; and considering the role the public might play in the overall direction of the new ECA.

The responses arising from the Group's consideration of each of these tasks are presented on the following pages.

IDENTIFYING THE PUBLICS TO BE SERVED BY THE NEW ECA

The publics to be served by the new ECA consist of anyone with an interest in the long-term future of environmental stewardship in Alberta, consistent with the new ECA's mission. This encompasses a wide range of people including: children, youth, parents, grandparents, futurists, those people in organizations with a mandate compatible with that of the ECA, those affected by the topics under consideration, and those with relevant expertise or experience.

The Transitional Working Group believes all of these publics may contribute to the work of the new ECA at various times and in various ways depending on the issues and topics under consideration. Because these publics are so diverse, certain kinds of principles need to be developed to encourage meaningful participation, and many techniques and approaches should be used to help connect the various publics with the new ECA.

SELECTING PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE NEW ECA AND ITS PUBLICS

In consideration of the many publics to be served by the new ECA, the Transitional Working Group proposes the following operating principles. These will guide the relationships between the new ECA and its many publics and should help encourage consistent and meaningful participation. No one principle operates by itself. They are interconnected.

1. **Diversity** — The new ECA should be committed to getting input from people with diverse backgrounds. People should be invited to participate for their ability to contribute, not necessarily because they represent a particular organization. However, where appropriate, representation from a broad spectrum of organizations should be solicited. There should be various ways in which people can participate.
2. **Flexibility** — Opportunities for participation should be flexible and various. People should be able to enter and withdraw from the public processes of the new ECA, as they wish.
3. **Independence** — Independence of thought about environmental conservation topics should be encouraged, within the mandate and mission of the new ECA. Neither the new ECA nor the publics engaged in its processes should exist for the purpose of advocating the positions of any particular group or organization, or of existing government policy.
4. **Credibility** — The process of engagement with the public should be made clear. People should know how and when they can participate. The information produced should be complete, accurate and defensible.
5. **Information is Public** — Information gathered during the public processes should be in the public domain and accessible.
6. **Honoring Consensus and Difference** — Reaching for common ground should be attempted where appropriate, but should not be a sign of the success or failure of any public process. Differing or irreconcilable views should be presented and accepted as such.
7. **Focus on Possibilities** — Where appropriate, options or alternate, value-based possibilities should be presented rather than the solution, to honor the different value bases of the people involved.
8. **Continuity** — The new ECA should be committed to having long-standing as well as ad hoc or short-term public processes.
9. **Innovation** — The new ECA should develop new ways in which to engage the publics it serves, as well as new ways to present the resultant advice, options and information. These should be evaluated to allow for continuous improvement.
10. **Integrity** — The new ECA should ensure the principles are adhered to and should honor its mandate.

INTERACTING WITH THE PUBLICS TO BE SERVED BY THE NEW ECA

With an understanding of the diverse nature of the publics to be served by the new ECA and of the principles for guiding participation with the many publics, the Transitional Working Group directed its attention to the "how to" of engaging these publics. The "how to" is related to each of the four main activities of the new ECA. These include scanning and issue identification, setting priorities, analyzing information and presenting options, and distributing information.

The kinds of people engaged in each of these four main activities may depend on the issues, and no one group should necessarily constitute a long-standing body to the new ECA. In recognition of the diverse nature of various publics, many different processes should be considered in engaging these publics. While no single method is recommended to accomplish each activity, all of the methods listed should not necessarily be implemented at the same time. The proposed methods for each of the four activities are listed below with accompanying explanatory remarks. These methods can be used to deal with any topics relevant to the new ECA mandate and are listed in no particular order.

Proposed Methods for Interacting with the ECA's Publics

Activity 1: Scanning and Issues Identification

This activity refers to finding out about trends and changes in the kinds of issues relevant to environmental conservation in the future. These changes can be economic, social, or biophysical.

Methods	Explanation
Pods/Regional Listening Posts	Soliciting opinions and information in small groups, for example, from people who have an ability to view issues from a broad perspective.
Use of Standing Association Meetings	An informal, unstructured way to collect information during regular meetings.
Workshops	Gatherings of people to exchange information, discuss values, opinions and the evolution of solutions or strategies.
Direct Solicitation	Can cover a large spectrum of people or specific groups. Information can be solicited on an issue-specific basis. Input can be on an individual basis. It can be done face to face, by phone or by a questionnaire.
Think Tank	Consists of technical experts. There could be several think tanks on different topics at the same time, depending on the issues being dealt with.
Media Scan	Could be done continuously in-house or externally on an as-required basis. Underway.
Use of Expert Advice	On an issue-by-issue basis with expert advice from around the world. This could be embraced by the technical think tank.
Belonging to Data Networks	Underway.
Electronic and Print Scans	Done by staff using literature and databases. Underway.
Public Opinion Leader Surveying	Periodic surveys of opinion leaders.
Public Hearings	Formal hearings to seek information on particular issues. Can only be done at Cabinet request.
Scan of Government Activities	Through contact with departments and interdepartmental committees. Underway.

Activity 2: Setting Priorities

This activity refers to establishing the order and importance of the issues identified in Activity 1: Scanning and Issues Identification, to the new ECA. This activity results in setting the new ECA's work agenda.

The Transitional Working Group recommends the establishment of an Advisory Board to help identify priority topics and objectives in concert with staff input. This recommendation is consistent with the principle of continuity. Proposals about this Board are outlined in the section "Considering the Role of the Public in the Overall Direction of the new ECA" (see page 11). ECA staff will periodically be expected to synthesize and analyze the results of their scanning and issues identification activities for consideration by the CEO and the Board.

Proposed criteria for priority setting include

(i) Ensuring the objectives are consistent with the new ECA's mandate and mission; that is, they are oriented to long-term trends or strategic issues,

(ii) Ensuring no other department or agency is actively pursuing the specific work or initiatives under consideration unless the increased attention by the new ECA would add particular value to the work or initiative and,

(iii) Ensuring the new ECA has appropriate resources by which to make, or assist with making, a credible contribution.

Activity 3: Analyzing Information and Presenting Options

This activity is intended to provide the systematic and defensible treatment of a topic and, where appropriate, develop strategic options for the future. The focus is on developing options and possibilities rather than absolute solutions.

Methods	**Explanation**
Workshops	Workshops gather together people in groups to deal with a specific issue.
Technical Group	To review the scanning results and advise on the work program or specific, substantive topics. This group will comprise recognized expertise.
Task Forces	A small group with a finite life and bounded terms of reference. It will conclude its business with a defined product such as a report.
Ad Hoc Working Group	Could be set up on an as-required basis to discuss specific topics.
In-Residence Program	Establishment of limited-term positions for volunteers, executives and academics to spend concentrated periods of time working with in-house staff. Underway.

Activity 4: Distributing Information

Information distribution activities relate to the ways in which information is made available to the Minister of Environment and the publics served by the new ECA. The methods listed below include those proposed for information distribution and those suitable for finding out people's information needs.

Methods	**Explanation**
Use of Information Centres	Use existing repositories throughout the province.
Use of the ECA Newsletter	Ongoing mechanism, update reader lists to ensure that everyone who wants one gets one. Information needs could be solicited from its readers.
Focus Groups	These could be used from time to time to assess the relevance of the information that is being produced by the new ECA.
Inquiries from the Public	A system of collecting relevant data from telephone requests for information.
Distribution Networks	Libraries, TV, mail.
Briefings	To Minister, committees and groups as necessary. These can be verbal, electronic, and written.
Annual Report	Include a progress report of Advisory Board activities in the annual report of the ECA.

CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC IN THE OVERALL DIRECTION OF THE NEW ECA

To provide for a public role in the overall direction of the new ECA, the Transitional Working Group recommends an Advisory Board. The proposed purpose of this Board is to

- provide advice and feedback to the new ECA relevant to its mandate, vision, mission and principles, and specifically to assist the CEO,
- review the operations of the new ECA to ensure they fit within its mandate and principles,
- determine the direction of the new ECA by participation in priority setting,
- build relationships between the new ECA and its external publics during the transition period.

Board members

- should be selected through an open, defensible process;
- must represent themselves, rather than particular organizations;
- should together have diverse backgrounds; a broad, informed knowledge base; the ability to be futures-oriented; and group process skills.

Detailed administrative and operational matters have not been considered, with the following exceptions. We recommend that the Board have no more than 18 members. We recommend that all reasonable expenses incurred by members be reimbursed but that an honorarium not be given; however, we recognize that remuneration remains at the discretion of the CEO (as stated in the legislation). We recommend that the Board's advice be recorded as part of the Council's annual report. Furthermore, we recommend that members have rotational terms.

RECOMMENDATION

The Transitional Working Group has recommended a strategy to help the new ECA achieve its mission. We are confident the strategy will work if implemented with vigor, timeliness, and focus. But how will the new ECA know whether this strategy is effective and faithful to the mission? The following benchmarks are suggested as criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy.

(i) Exploring topics of potential significance to environmental conservation which are not yet seen as significant environmental issues;

(ii) Exploring topics that are assumed today to affect only one region of Alberta but, in fact, have provincewide implications;

(iii) Exploring topics that have transboundary implications, involving Alberta and other jurisdictions;

(iv) Exploring topics that are relevant to environmental conservation from a variety of perspectives: social and economic, as well as biophysical.

The Transitional Working Group recommends this report be implemented early in 1992.